

Language assessing: some general considerations

Language assessing in linguistically and culturally diverse educational settings

Research has shown that mastery of academic language can be developed only through engagement with the different curriculum subjects. This means that the linguistic and educational integration of children/adolescents from migrant backgrounds depends on how effectively language is brought into focus in mainstream education.

The linguistic demands of curriculum subjects change from grade to grade. Therefore, it is essential to have ways of measuring educational progress that take account of official policy and its implementation strategies, especially at points of transition from one stage of education to the next. That is why language diagnostics has to play an essential role in inclusive language education across the curriculum. It is necessary to identify the individual learner's level of language proficiency and performance not only in general but also in relation to the requirements of academic language at key stages throughout the educational process.

General considerations

Diagnostics is a comparative activity based on the measurement of any feature and/or competence. In the chart below, three different benchmarks of comparison for language diagnostics are described:

Benchmark	Point of reference
Social benchmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• well-defined reference- group (based on age, gender, grade...)
Criterion-oriented benchmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• developmental milestones that derive from language acquisition (can be described in terms of phonetic-phonological, semantic, morpho-syntactic, pragmatic and discourse features)• linked to learning objectives that are valid in a particular society
Individual benchmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• an individual's level of proficiency or achievement at a given time is compared with his/her proficiency or achievement at an earlier date• focus tends to be on process and change in a long-term perspective

Whenever diagnostic tools are used in educational contexts they should correspond to the developmental and language learning stage of the children or adolescents in question. A variety of assessment approaches are available to meet (some of) the demands that multilingual contexts impose on language diagnostics: standardised tests, observation, analytical tools and language samples, portfolios and questionnaires for groups of pupils at different levels of schooling.

Different approaches

Broadly speaking there are two approaches to diagnostics: standardized tests and alternative, performance-based approaches.

In the chart below the differences between the two approaches are described:

Standardised Tests	
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • based on theory • use of psychometrics to achieve standardization • language proficiency is divided into a number of components → test-takers are measured to which extent they have mastered those components
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be highly reliable, objective and valid • administration is neither resource-intensive nor time-consuming
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concentration on components of language proficiency in a testing situation causes problems relating test results to the teaching and learning process • the focus is generally on one language: take no account of language development in a migrant situation or of growing up plurilingual • mostly developed with Western cultural and socialization norms in mind • plurilingual competences (code-switching, translating...) are not assessed

Alternative/Performance-based Tests	
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learner-centred • focus on conditions that influence language learning, language behavior and proficiency • interactive process, involving teachers and pupils • focus on resources and strengths as well as on weaknesses and transitional linguistic elements
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consideration of learners' languages, context-embedded and context-reduced speech, oral and written language, discourse functions and genres, informal language and academic discourse, different aspects of the language system, and language learning strategies • academic language and the description of its linguistic features, structures and genres play a central role • focus on qualitative aspects of language acquisition and learning as well as on developmental processes and changes
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • administration is time-consuming → to take account of the dynamics of language learning processes, the assessment needs to be done in several "data collection rounds"

Diagnostic tools for language assessment

Examples of diagnostic tools and procedures

1) *Analytical approaches*

Profile analysis:

The objective of the profile analysis is to assess aspects of language development in greater depth and more holistically than standardized tests are able to. If for example the focus is on oral proficiency, stimuli of various kinds are used to elicit authentic speech, which is recorded, transcribed and analysed. The “learner profile” that is gained after analysing the data refers to competences in the key dimensions of language: discourse-pragmatic, morphological-syntactic, semantic, phonological (for speaking), and orthographic (for writing).

Examples for this tool would be HAVAS 5, Tulpenbeet or Boomerang: <http://www.foermig.uni-hamburg.de/web/de/all/mat/diag/index.html>

Language sampling

This method records learners’ performance of classroom tasks for later analysis revealing their actual and developing competences. Language sampling is considered a useful way of making teachers more aware of an individual learner’s competences and needs. Furthermore, it helps to understand the different pathways that migrant learners take in their acquisition of the language of schooling.

The strength of the analytical approach is that it can provide an in-depth diagnosis on the basis of a single language sample. Furthermore, because the approach entails working with rather than just testing language, it results in greater sensitivity to the learning of languages in multilingual educational contexts and to academic language and its complexity.

2) *Observation tools, self-assessment and documentation practices*

Observation

Observation is based on describing what is perceived and analysing and interpreting what is described. It follows strict procedures, basing description on clearly defined criteria and categories.

This diagnostic tool has many advantages, such as its easy integration into classroom activities, the observation of authentic language performance and its possible application at any time throughout the biographic-educational process.

Along with the advantages, there comes also a set of challenges. In order to be reliable and accessible to others observed data must be transparent, recognisable and comprehensible. It must be clear, for instance, what the observation is focusing on, how the behaviour or situation under observation is categorised and classified, why particular criteria or descriptors are being used, what they mean, and where they come from in terms of theoretical background and empirical research findings. Observation in an educational context is thus a demanding and highly sensitive procedure that requires appropriate training.

- Key-stage descriptors for German as a second language

The focus in this approach is on competence and competence progression at primary and secondary levels. It links standards in language as subject to the curriculum of framework. The aim is to define language-learning targets for all learners and the successive key stages through which they pass in achieving these targets.

Because the descriptors combine general educational standards with the second language curriculum, they make second language progression visible both for language teachers and for teachers of other curriculum subjects. By supporting second language development across the curriculum, they provide a framework for discussion of language learning and possible ways of supporting it.

The descriptors are divided into seven categories: discourse functions (reception and production), vocabulary, phonology, reading, writing, grammar (oral and written), and personality traits such as motivation. Key stages were defined for all categories. From Stage I to Stage III learners gradually increase their proficiency in the language of schooling, while Stage IV specifies objectives using the standards for language as subject. For more information: <http://www.foermig.uni-hamburg.de/web/de/all/mat/diag/index.html>

- Continuous observation of the second language writing process

This assessment tool is concerned with academic language learning by secondary students from migrant backgrounds in mainstream content classrooms. It provides a framework for the formative assessment of learners' progress towards mastery of written discourse functions like arguing, reporting, explaining, describing. Each function is divided into six competence levels (e.g. lexical appropriateness, syntactic complexity, textual coherence). When teachers assign their learners written tasks like explaining concepts in mathematics, describing pictures in art, and reporting research findings from a science project, the framework can be used to assess learners' writing in terms of content objectives as well as language learning.

The framework can provide learners with individualized criterion-oriented feedback and it can be used to support teacher-pupil dialogues/diagnostic interviews.

- Documentation of language development (transition from kindergarden to elementary school)

This scheme contains three parts: a documentation sheet for the individual child, a comprehensive guide for teachers, and a portfolio for the child. The portfolio is designed to be used in first and second grades and offers the possibility of incorporating a so-called "language learning diary" that children and their teachers use in kindergarden. The instrument documents individual language acquisition with particular reference to phonological awareness, auditory perception, oral discourse, grammar, text reception and production, and orthography. The teacher gathers evidence of pupils' performances for an in-depth examination of their language development. Parents are involved in the assessment as they are asked to provide information on their child's acquisition of the home language, language use outside school, literacy activities in the home, and so on.

Reference:

- **Lengeyl, Drorit (2010):** Language diagnostics in multilingual settings with respect to continuous procedures as accompaniment of individualized learning and teaching. Language Policy Division Directorate of Education and Languages, DGIV Council of Europe, Strasbourg. S. 7-20.